



CAIRDE EANLAITH NA GAILLIMHE BIRDWATCH GALWAY

www.birdwatchgalway.org
QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER – EDITOR: NEIL SHARKEY
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Issue No. 58/07 Aug 2007

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THOUGHT FROM THE CHAIR

Dear members, the summer is coming to an end, although some might say that it never started properly. Although it is sad to see the end of summer, there is plenty to look forward to with the arrival of autumn. The branch restarts business in September after the summer break and, of course, we start all of our regular winter I-WeBS counts at Lough Corrib, Galway Bay and at other wetland sites all across the county. In November work will also be starting on the new breeding and wintering birds atlases; the previous atlases were compiled from survey work that finished in 1991 and 1984 respectively and work is set to continue until 2011. October the 6th sees the first of this season's Nimmo's Pier outings with Tim Griffin. Tim has been running these events on the first Saturday of the month since spring 1995- nearly 13 years! With nine events per year, this adds up to approximately 110 outings, which have been attended by hundreds of people. For many Tim's outings have been an introduction both to birding and to the branch. These trips have been invaluable to the branch, both in their outreach to the public and as an aid to recruiting new members. I would like to take this opportunity to publicly thank Tim for his efforts in the past and into the future.

Chris Peppiatt

BAHRAIN

Over the past eight or nine years family connection has brought us almost annually to Dubai and this newsletter has had several pieces dealing with that now exotic location - synonymous with high (really high!) rise hotels, world sporting events and (surprisingly) first class wintering birdwatching opportunities. However just recently events have brought about a change of location to Bahrain which we then visited in March.

The Kingdom of Bahrain is a small island further up the Arabian Gulf from Dubai and several hundred km. to the northwest of the UAE. In 1986 a long causeway connection with Saudi Arabia was completed. The island is small – perhaps about the size of County Carlow - if you can imagine that county as an island! Like most Middle East countries it is hot hot – even in winter. However, until recent years it did have a lot of agriculture and at one time not that long ago was self-sufficient in food. But, alas, over- extraction of aquifers and increased salinity has greatly reduced fertility and agricultural output. It is much less wealthy than Dubai, having exhausted all of its oil reserves. In appearance it is typical Middle East – high rise and 'glittery' in Manama, the largest and indeed only city, with small dusty and untidy villages elsewhere. There are impressive remains and evidence of the very ancient 'Dilmun' civilization dating back to circa 2000BC. The Bahraini national museum is of dramatic design and with excellent content and presentation. Signs of environmental



awareness or concern are sadly lacking. Economically it is a lively trading and banking centre and has a healthy per capita GDP, although this could perhaps be more evenly distributed.

However, for birdwatchers the real test of any visit destination is its bird potential. In this Bahrain was not lacking and I achieved for me a respectable list of sixty-five species. However, this list would not have been at all possible to any extent without the help and guidance of local birdwatchers Brendan Kavanagh and Howard King. Brendan I knew already from years back before he moved to Bahrain where he is currently on secondment from the Royal College of Surgeons Dublin who are setting up a campus there. Howard King is a genial Welshman, long time Bahrain resident, and with an unrivalled knowledge of Bahrain's birds. As with all birdwatching away from your home base local knowledge is indispensable and Brendan and Howard provided this with a generosity of time, friendship and enthusiasm. Also in Middle Eastern countries birdwatching can involve security and permission issues. Without local help and knowledge, at best your birdwatching is limited and at worst can involve unwelcome interviews with local police or other security forces! Birds seen included European Bee-eater, Red-throated Pipit; Purple Heron; Water Pipit; Black-eared Wheatear; Yellow Wagtail (Feldeg); Squacco Heron; Desert Wheatear; Gull-billed Tern etc., with the final total of sixty five. Bahrain seems particularly good for wheatears and shrikes. However, the bird of the trip has to be the Grey Hypocolius (*Hypocolius ampelinus*). (See photograph). This is a single genus species with the Waxwing being its nearest 'relation'. It is considered among one of the most difficult world birds to see or

record. The reason for this is geographical. It breeds almost wholly in Iraq and Iran and winters mainly in Saudi Arabia. For obvious reasons these areas are not particularly conducive to everyday birdwatching! However Bahrain has a wintering population. The birds are fruit eating and spend their days in date plantations. Just before dusk – which comes quickly – they fly into established roosts. The long established Bahrain roost is in an acacia tree in a suburban open space in Saar in the east of the city. Sadly, the site it is now much degraded by neglect, dumping and encroaching development. Given that this is the only spot in the world where the Grey Hypocolius can be seen with any certainty it is a shame that there is absolutely no protection or regard by the authorities for this location. Roosting numbers peak in mid winter - Dec to Jan. At one time these numbered up to a thousand or more but nowadays peak only in the mid to low hundreds. By late March, the time of my visit, the birds had mostly departed and I was fortunate to see just the single bird that came into roost that evening. Nevertheless I got good views of this elusive species.

While Bahrain is not a 'must visit' destination for birdwatchers a trip there does prove to be surprisingly rewarding and one which I certainly hope to repeat.

NS

KINGFISHER PLEA

Olivia Crowe, who is co-ordinating the National Kingfisher Survey for BirdWatch Ireland, has made a last plea for records of sightings. To date 450 records have been received from 136 participants. But there seem to be some gaps and it would be nice if they could be filled. If you have seen Kingfishers, please submit your record(s) to ocrowe@birdwatch.ie with the date of the sighting(s), a grid reference or a description of the location (inc. river name and county) and the number of kingfishers seen. All records are welcome, particularly those since 2000. Thanks!

MtC

NEWS ABOUT NEWS

Now that all the Galway counts of this winter's Non-Estuarine Waterbird Survey (NEWS) have been put together we can make some comparisons between the results of this last survey and that carried out during the winter of 1997-98. But, before we look at the birds, a few words about the survey in general. While non-estuarine coast is not typically well represented in the Irish Wetland Bird Survey core counts it has been shown that for some species the non-estuarine birds make up very significant proportions of the total population of these species wintering in Ireland. This justifies the regular, if sporadic, monitoring of the non-estuarine habitats and their birds. This entails surveying randomly pre-selected sections of coast of which observers are asked to walk the length, counting all waders occurring along the shore, wildfowl (largely the diver



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and duck species) and gulls occurring on the sea or along the shore, and also keeping an eye on any waterbirds occurring on adjacent land. In County Galway all non-estuarine stretches of coast are to the west and north of Inner Galway Bay, i.e. west of Barna and up beyond Cleggan, even including Inishbofin. Despite the frustrations of having to cover long distances, often over very difficult terrain and, especially this last season, during bad weather, the commitment of those venturing out to apply themselves to this daunting task has been beyond expectation and is very much appreciated. Although we missed some of the stalwarts from the previous survey, this year ten more volunteers joined the ranks and they were assisted by two fieldworkers employed by the NEWS co-ordinators from BirdWatch Ireland, Helen Boland and Olivia Crowe. Thanks are due to Aonghus O Donnell, Ger O'Donnell and Rob Hollaway (NPWS), Kathryn Finney and Cerian Thomas (NEWS field workers), Tim Gordon who covered Inishbofin and recorded 539 birds there, and branch members (in alphabetical order) Michael Davis, Pam Davis, Mary Finnegan, Pat Finnegan, Paul Finnegan, Marie Louise Heffernan, Padraig Keirns, Pam Keirns, Ruaidhri O Bearra, Chris Peppiatt, Neil Sharkey, Marianne ten Cate and Jenny Whilde. We were particularly relieved that Padraig and Pam did make it back to the mainland after having been stranded on Finish Island and that Pat didn't get more than one tumble and two wet socks during a rocky shore expedition on leather-soled 'town shoes' because he forgot to bring his walking boots. A hardy lot! During the 1997-98 survey 63 randomly chosen stretches of coast were surveyed, compared to 60, amounting to 296.21km of coast, this winter. Only 23 stretches were covered in both winters. Previously, there was one stretch without any birds, but fortunately that didn't happen again as 8 birds was the minimum recorded this time. Unfortunately, I do not have the number of kilometers covered in 1997-98 to hand. At that time we recorded 4,877 birds as against 5,130 birds this winter – a small and probably insignificant increase. The main difference between the two surveys shows in the species ranking. Whereas Oystercatcher, Curlew, Ringed Plover, Cormorant and Lapwing were the top five species of the 43 recorded in 1997-98, this time we had Ringed Plover, Herring Gull, Oystercatcher, Common Gull and Sanderling topping the poll of 40. Only 12 Lapwing were recorded this year, while gull numbers quadrupled. This marked increase in gulls may well be due to the arrival of fish cages in some of the bays along the coast. As expected, Little Egrets showed a marked increase as well, from 1 to 9, the reverse of Snipe numbers which dropped from 8 to 1. Surprisingly, oystercatchers and curlew numbers were halved. Oystercatchers were present in only 38 of the 60 stretches. Yet, loud as they are, they seemed so much more ubiquitous. The only bird which was recorded at the exact same number was the Wigeon (85); of course, the difference

between 10 Purple Sandpipers and 11 is small enough, too. Most other species showed big discrepancies between the two surveys and 'new' species recorded this time round were Red-throated Diver, Slavonian Grebe, Common Scoter, Golden Plover, Lesser Black-backed Gull and Puffin. It will be very interesting to see what the national totals show in comparison with our small selection of sites and birds on the Galway west coast. Helen and Olivia are working on the analysis of the figures and we have their report to look forward to. Again, many thanks to all those who took part in the survey and gave so much of their time and energy to it.

Marianne ten Cate

BIRDS IN POETRY

Elizabeth Bishop, born in Massachusetts, is regarded as one of the leading poets of the 20th century. The poem *Sandpiper* demonstrates her finest qualities, precise observations transformed by the ripples of her imagination. There is a personal resonance also because she once said "All my life I have lived and behaved like that sandpiper – just running along the edge of different countries." It is no wonder that Seamus Heaney described *Sandpiper* as a perfect achievement.

Pat Finnegan

SANDPIPER

The roaring alongside he takes for granted,
and that every so often the world is bound to shake .
He runs, he runs to the south, finical, awkward,
in a state of controlled panic, a student of Blake.

The beach hisses like fat. On his left, a sheet
of interrupting water comes and goes
and glazes over his dark and brittle feet.
He runs, he runs straight through it, watching his toes,

- Watching, rather, the spaces of sand between them,
where (no detail too small) the Atlantic drains
rapidly backwards and downwards. As he runs,
he stares at the dragging grains.

The world is a mist. And then the world is
minute and vast and clear. The tide
is higher or lower. He couldn't tell you which.
His beak is focussed; he is preoccupied,

looking for something, something, something.
Poor bird, he is obsessed!
The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray ,
mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst.

Elizabeth Bishop

Taken from *On Wings of Song*,
Published by Everyman's Library.

FAREWELL

We will miss Todd Watkins who has just returned to the USA after a period of sabbatical in NUIG. His accomplished birdwatching skills and enthusiastic participation in our counts and other events were much appreciated and his presence was a moral boost to the branch – the pity is that his stay was so short. We wish him well into the future.

NS

FORTHCOMING PROGRAMME

- Sunday 26 August, BirdWatch will take part in the Biodiversity family day at Portumna Castle and Gardens and Portumna Forest Park, organised by the Galway County Biodiversity Project, in association with Coillte, OPW and Friends of Portumna; 2-5pm. Activities for young and old(er).
- Wednesday, 19 September, committee/ members meeting, Anno Santo Hotel, Threadneedle Road, Salthill; 8pm. All members are welcome to attend!
- Friday 21 September, talk on "Waterfowl of Alaska" by John Reed. Anno Santo Hotel; 8pm. Everybody welcome.
- Saturday 6 October, short outing with Tim Griffin *et al.* at Nimmo's Pier, 10.30am.
- Wednesday 17 October, committee/members meeting, Anno Santo Hotel; 8pm. Feel free to come along!
- Friday 19 October, talk on "Hawks and Owls in Ireland" by Aonghus O Donnell, member of BWI and NPWS ranger in the west of County Galway. Anno Santo, 8pm.
- Saturday 3 November, short outing with Tim Griffin *et al.* at Nimmo's Pier, 10.30am.
- Wednesday 14 November, committee/ members meeting, Anno Santo; 8pm.
- Friday 16 November, talk on "Panama – a tale of two continents" by Niall Hatch, Development Officer with BirdWatch Ireland. Anno Santo Hotel, 8pm.
- NB After the September committee/members meeting details of an Autumn outing may be available. Please, contact Chris or Marianne for more information

